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\$1.5M to aid WKU, Allen Donation will help with scholarships for high school graduates

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Western Kentucky University's effort to educate future math and science teachers was boosted by a nearly \$1.5 million donation announced Tuesday at the Allen County Board of **Education**. The Laura Goad Turner Charitable Foundation will provide \$1.125 million for a scholarship fund while \$350,000 in additional funding will go to the SKyTeach program at WKU to recruit science, technology, engineering and math majors into teaching.

The SKyTeach program was started last year with funding from the National Math and Science Initiative and Exxon Mobil, which agreed to match \$250,000 of the donation by the Turner Foundation, making the total contribution to WKU more than \$1.7 million.

The scholarship portion of the donation will give \$5,000 scholarships to Allen County high school graduates. The recipients must agree to work a summer job in Allen County at a nonprofit organization as their salary also will be funded by the foundation.

WKU President Gary Ransdell said the scholarships will benefit students, the college and Allen County. "One of the main components of this scholarship is the service element that requires the student to be a volunteer in the community and contribute time back to an organization," he said. "This will affect the quality of life in Allen County and helps engage our students in the community, which may lead to the student staying in the community to go to work."

Ransdell also pointed to the benefits of the funding for recruiting science and math educators. "Few communities have the philanthropic energy that the Laura Goad Turner Charitable Foundation provides for this community," he said. "So we're fortunate to be their partner in this initiative."

Vicki Metzgar, **education** co-director of SKyTeach, said the program has been under way for a year and has already reached 46 students without heavy recruitment.

Metzgar said the goal for the fall is to enroll 80 students into the teacher recruitment program. "And gifts like this is what makes that possible," she said.

Katherine Sikora is the granddaughter of the scholarship's namesake. She said her grandmother was a terrific advocate for **education** and would have applauded the effort to reach so many local students. Sikora said there are currently two other scholarships for music and nursing students in her grandmother's name, and she has enjoyed seeing how the scholarships have helped several achieve their dreams.

"Seeing what a chance at life it's giving to them is an honor to me," Sikora said. "Because my grandmother was an advocate for **education** and had a heart the size of Texas ... she was here today in spirit."

Ransdell said the SKyTeach concept was modeled after UTeach, a math and science prep program at the University of Texas at Austin.

Western was one of 12 U.S. universities to receive the National Math and Science Initiative funding, Ransdell said.

Scott Bonham, associate physics professor at WKU and principal investigator for the SKyTeach program, said the support sends the right message to students and educators.

"One of the things this scholarship does is help us in our mission to show teaching is valued," he said. "Unfortunately, the attitude, particularly in science, is that if you're not good enough for graduate school then be a teacher, but that's not the way it is. Teaching is an ever changing, intellectual challenge."

Metzgar said the scholarship allows officials to select Allen County graduates who will set the caliber for the types of students they want to attract into the program.

"Things like this scholarship shows that Allen County values and that Western Kentucky values teachers, and that they will go out of their way to make a difference for the next generation," Bonham said.

Metzgar said SKyTeach recruits science and math majors in their first semester and encourages them through the teaching process throughout their entire college career.

Alexander Downing, president of the College Heights Foundation, said \$1 million of the scholarship fund will go into an endowment while the remaining \$125,000 will go immediately to providing scholarships.

"We want people to know that there is a critical need in the commonwealth and the nation for qualified science, technology, engineering and math teachers," Metzgar said. "This program attempts to meet that need by approaching capable students in math and science and saying 'have you ever thought about being a teacher?' Once we get them into the program, we think they make the best teachers."

Randall Jackson, superintendent of the Allen County School District, said teachers will begin talking to students about the scholarship their freshman year in high school to motivate them to do well in math and science.

"There is no doubt this will be a tremendous motivation to students as they go through high school," he said.